

Second review of the role and contribution of the CPS to the safeguarding of children

HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPISI) has today published its report on the role and contribution of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to the safeguarding of children. This report relates specifically to the CPS, and is complementary to the third joint chief inspectors' review of arrangements to safeguard children that was published on 8 July 2008.

This review found much that is positive about the work of the CPS in relation to safeguarding children. In particular since the first report it has published a policy document *Children and young people: a CPS policy on prosecuting criminal cases involving children and young people as victims and witnesses*. Additionally there have been significant developments in strategic planning and improvement in initiatives for victims and witnesses, including the introduction of a victim and witness strategy and more recently a violence against women (VAW) strategy which should benefit children who are victims of, or witnesses to, such crimes.

The CPS has updated its child abuse policy within its guidance on children as victims and witnesses, reiterating the three key principles of expedition, sensitivity and fairness. The guidance includes reference to historic child abuse cases. More detailed guidance will be provided shortly with national training made available across CPS areas. The outcomes in child abuse prosecutions are good, and the VAW strategy will include the monitoring of child abuse cases.

Nevertheless, there are considerable variations between areas as to the extent to which safeguarding children is a priority in local business plans and to the existence of child abuse coordinators or formal specialists. There is only an informal electronically-based network for child abuse issues, and there has been little collection and analysis of data in relation to child abuse cases since the last report. Progress has been slow in updating child abuse guidance and delivering national training.

There is national policy guidance in relation to developing links to local safeguarding children boards, but again there are variations across the areas as to the effectiveness of those links.

Main findings include:

- There have been significant developments in strategic planning and in the introduction of the victim and witness and VAW strategies, which will benefit children who are victims of, or witnesses to, such crimes.
- A specialist lawyer has put together a child abuse training course which has been piloted prior to national implementation. This will require support both nationally and at area level.
- Some areas have established good links with local safeguarding children boards.
- Child abuse will be the subject of definition and outcomes the subject of monitoring in support of the VAW strategy.

- A number of areas have taken action to improve the level of service in safeguarding children with examples including the provision of training to the Witness Service; joint work to improve child interview techniques and the quality of recorded interviews; work with the Young Witness Service; analysis of special measures at court to improve the quality of evidence; and joint work in relation to better arrangements for young witnesses attending court to give evidence.
- Cases involving children and young people before the courts as offenders are appropriately prioritised and their handling is mostly satisfactory with clear evidence of good work.
- Persistent young offenders (youths previously sentenced on at least three occasions in the previous three years) are now being dealt with more expeditiously. In 2007 on average within 65 days, well within the government's pledge to halve the time between arrest and sentence to 71 days. This has been further improved in the rolling quarter to February 2008.
- In some areas the priority in relation to safeguarding children has not been embedded in business plans, with the high profile launch of *Children and young people: a CPS policy on prosecuting criminal cases involving children and young people as victims and witnesses* getting a relatively low-key dissemination locally; some areas having no specific child abuse coordinators or specialists and little effective contact with local safeguarding children boards.
- Child abuse cases were generally handled well, but inspection activity has identified instances of failure to record whether the lawyer viewed video recorded interviews with child witnesses, with no record of assessment of the quality of the evidence. There has been little analysis of the effectiveness of special measures adopted at court which enable those video recorded interviews to be used as evidence in chief.
- The CPS's policy to directly communicate with victims if cases are dropped or charges significantly changed was not always implemented in cases involving children.

Five recommendations are made:

- Action is taken to ensure the strategic approach to safeguarding translates into area planning and operational practice.
- Engagement with local safeguarding children boards is formalised to ensure CPS participation where appropriate.
- Child abuse coordinators are appointed locally with an effective network, and child abuse case outcomes are monitored locally so that lessons can be identified and disseminated.
- Video recorded interviews with child witnesses are always watched and assessments and decisions recorded.
- Child abuse is defined and outcomes analysed; consideration should be given to a monitoring exercise of the use of special measures for child witnesses to give evidence; and results of unduly lenient sentence referrals in child abuse cases are analysed and disseminated to coordinators/ relevant prosecutors and caseworkers.

Stephen Wooler CB, HM Chief Inspector said:

"It is impossible to overstate the importance of ensuring that all work involving children is done to the highest possible standard. This report shows steady commitment on the part of the CPS to building the principles of safeguarding children into all aspects of its work. There has been significant progress and more can be achieved through stronger local emphasis to ensure that children receive the full benefits of the policies which have been put in place".

This press release should be read in conjunction with the report itself and the executive summary which is integral to it.